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"Listen, Lord" A Prayer for Preachers by James Weldon Johnson

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"Listen, Lord" A Prayer for Preachers by James Weldon Johnson

WITH REFLECTIONS BY LEE MAGNESS

This reading consists of the text of a moving poem-prayer by the great African-American writer James Weldon Johnson and a line-by-line reflection on it (in italics). The prayer alone could be read by a single reader (perhaps an African-American reader) or the prayer with reflections could be read by two readers.

O Lord, we come this morning

this sun-up, new-day morning, this sun-up Sun-day morning

Knee-bowed and body-bent

the attitude of humility, the attitude of humility

Before Thy throne of grace.

privileged but not prideful, graced but not groveling

O Lord — this morning —

this very morning, this every morning

Bow our hearts beneath our knees,

make it more than a matter of posture

And our knees in some lonesome valley.

the valley where we meet our need, where our need meets you

We come this morning —

this dawning morning, this yawning morning

Like empty pitchers to a full fountain,

ready to be rinsed, eager to overflow

With no merits of our own.

no merit but mercy

O Lord — open up a window of heaven,

And lean out far over the battlements of glory,

And listen this morning.

to our morning prayers, to our mourning cares

to our morning fears, to our mourning tears

lean clean out, Lord, and listen

Lord, have mercy on proud and dying sinners —

not on some but all, since all of us are

Sinners hanging over the mouth of hell,

Who seem to love their distance well.

from you obviously, from it obliviously

Lord — ride by this morning —
 ride on, King Jesus
Mount Your milk-white horse,
And ride-a this morning —
 ride on, King Jesus
And in Your ride, ride by old hell,
Ride by the dingy gates of hell,
 ride on, King Jesus
And stop poor sinners in their headlong plunge.

And now, O Lord, this man of God,
 this preacher man, this creature man
Who breaks the bread of life this morning —
 breakfast for our hungry, sleepy souls
Shadow him in the hollow of Thy hand,
 heal and help, but mostly hold
And keep him out of the gunshot of the devil.

Take him, Lord — this morning —
 this very morning, this every morning
Wash him with hyssop inside and out,
Hang him up and drain him dry of sin.
 scrubbed by scripture till he's
 don't-forget-to-wash-behind-your-fears clean
 an earthen pot but ready for treasure

Pin his ear to the wisdom-post,
And make his words sledge hammers of truth —
Beating on the iron heart of sin.
 and the still heart and the still troubled heart
 and the heavy heart and the light heart
 and the hard heart and the heartless heart

Lord God, this morning —
 this very morning, this every morning
Put his eye to the telescope of eternity,
And let him look upon the paper walls of time.
 seeing straight through the thin things, if you will
 all the way to the thick things of your will

Lord, turpentine his imagination,
 and his memory and his mind
Put perpetual motion in his arms,
 and his feet and his tongue
Fill him full of the dynamite of Thy power,
 exploding our myths, destroying our walls

Anoint him all over with the oil of Thy salvation,
and us with the Anointed one, the Savior himself
And set his tongue on fire.
Enflamed with the Spirit, with Pentecost-passion

And now, O Lord —
Lord of life, Lord over death
When I've done drunk my last cup of sorrow —
passing on the prayer to let-this-cup-pass
When I've been called everything but a child of God —
even though that's all I ever was or hope to be
When I'm done traveling up the rough side of the mountain —
the steep side, the rocky side, the rugged side
O — Mary's Baby —
sweet little Jesus boy
When I start down the steep and slippery steps of death —
slip-sliding away on the stone cold mud-slide, blood-slide
When this old world begins to rock beneath my feet —
rocking and rolling, O Rock of Ages
Lower me to my dusty grave in peace
the peace that passes all understanding
To wait for that great gittin'-up morning —
this morning, that morning
Amen.
and Amen

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